

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 21

NEW YORK POST
12 March 1987

Congress dragging its feet on Tower panel's call for a joint intelligence committee

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IN ITS unsparing and brutally frank criticism of the Reagan administration's mistakes in the Iran debacle, the Tower Commission performed a real service for President Reagan by making it easier for him to identify and institute the changes necessary in personnel, policy and procedure.

As demonstrated by the appointment of Howard Baker, Frank Carlucci and William Webster, the President has finally moved decisively to repair the damage and has put a team of experienced pragmatists into key positions in his administration. The National Security Council staff is also being restructured along the lines of the commission's recommendations.

By contrast, the response in the U.S. Congress has been mixed and muted to the one clear and specific recommendation of the Tower panel that applies to the legislature's way of doing business.

Pulling no punches, the Tower board asserts the Executive and Legislative Branches may be equally responsible for the growing frequency of leaks of classified information.

But the commission states flatly that the excessive number of members and staff aides that make up the House and Senate Intelligence Committees "provides cause for concern and a convenient excuse for presidents to avoid congressional consultation."

Having placed its finger

squarely on the most serious vulnerability of the intelligence oversight process, the commission recommends that Congress replace its two Intelligence Committees with a single joint committee, modeled on the Joint Atomic Energy Committee of the mid-1970s.

With a combined membership of more than 30 senators and representatives and more than 60 authorized staffers, this bloated oversight structure provides cover for leakers who find safety in the sheer number of suspects who have to be interviewed by a frustrated FBI.

Given the strategic reality that effective American covert action will continue to be necessary over the

next decade in dealing with Soviet interventions, a number of responsible members of Congress have risen to the Tower Commission's challenge.

In the House the ranking minority member of the Intelligence Committee, Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.), has introduced legislation that already has 87 sponsors and would establish a joint committee.

In the Senate, Sen. Dan Quayle (R-Ind.) has introduced similar legislation and has reason to hope that Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and other moderate Democrats may join as co-sponsors.

At present, the intelligence agencies' chiefs reveal as little as possible because of fear of leaks, and the compe-

tent congressional review that could have prevented the Iran debacle was never brought to bear because of security concerns that persuaded the administration to bypass Congress entirely.

Another undeniable reality that is forcing Congress to reform its oversight function is the accumulating evidence that the intelligence services of our NATO allies are increasingly withholding information from us for fear of leaks.

Defenders of the status quo on the Senate and House Intelligence Committees claim the Executive Branch is the real source of serious leaks. For more liberal Democrats, skeptical of all forms of covert action, the current elaborate and leaky

machinery of oversight can be relied on to reduce covert actions to a minimum.

But the most substantial obstacle to necessary reform in this field is the determination of the large and well-paid staff of both committees to hold on to their jobs — and the desire of many of the members on these two committees to enjoy the high profile and TV notoriety that can be used to insure reelection.

In order to achieve necessary and overdue reform, some senators, representatives and staffers are going to have to give up influential and well-paid positions. That is the bitter pill that the Tower Commission is asking more than half of the intelligence oversight bureaucracy to swallow for the greater good of the country.